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Commentary on Michael Yong-Set, “Getting Down in the MUDs: A Ludological Perspective on Arguers”

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High-level analogies between seemingly separate fields of study are powerful tools for both theory and hypothesis generation. Examples of this are not hard to find in the history of science. Explaining the properties of light required the use of at least two source analogs: that of physical objects such as billiard balls, or that of disturbances in some medium, such as waves. These two analogs, however, correspond to analogical comparisons that produce very different hypotheses. If light consists of a set of billiard-ball-like particles, they should be able to strike metal plates and displace electrons – known as the *photoelectric effect*. If light is more like a wave, then there must be some medium through which this wave propagates, which came to be known as the *luminiferous aether*.

We now know that the truth is much more complex than these analogies could have ever predicted; light behaves both like a particle and a wave. This famously counterintuitive result came to us through empirical experimentation, not analogical reasoning alone. But we must be careful to understand the role played by the analogical reasoning which got us to that point: the light-as-particle and light-as-wave analogies each committed to empirically testable, and seemingly incompatible hypotheses (the wave theory alone could not explain the photoelectric effect, and the particle theory had no need of the luminiferous aether). The strange behavior of light still today is explained to students using the analogies of particles and waves. These analogies persist in part because their source domains are so easy to understand (everyone has intuitive experience observing and interacting with physical objects bouncing off of each other and waves traveling through some medium).

Evaluating high-level analogies, such as the one proposed by Michael Yong-Set between Ludologically-understood gaming and argumentation can benefit tremendously by keeping in mind the example of particles vs. waves. For such an analogy to be of use, it does not necessarily need to produce empirically testable hypotheses. Neither does it need to produce a radically new way of conceptualizing the target domain. It does not even need to produce bold, new claims. But if it struggles to do *all* of these things, then one must at the very least ask why, if the high-level analogy is worthwhile, this is the case. What exactly do we get out of this analogy that we would not have otherwise?

Paul Bartha’s Articulation Model (AM) is a highly effective and algorithmic way to answer such questions (Bartha, 2010). According to AM, it is helpful to examine the analogy by imagining a back-and-forth between an advocate and a critic, ultimately assessing the analogy in terms of its ability to make explicit two elements: its **prior association**, and its **potential for generalization**.

Broadly, an analogical argument’s prior association is “a clear connection, in the source domain, between the known similarities (the positive analogy) and the further similarity that is

projected to hold in the target domain (the hypothetical analogy)” (Bartha, 2010, p. 94). Making the prior association explicit in the source domain – that of ludologically-understood games – is the first step. There are multiple plausible candidates, but I will only discuss one, which we will call **PA**: *Accommodating diverse player types encourages increased overall engagement in games, and not doing so harms engagement. Thus, we should accommodate diverse player types in models of gaming.* To be sure, we’re skipping a few steps here. **PA** as stated above is a rather dense relationship involving many abstract elements, each of which could use more careful explication in a more systematic use of AM. But for brevity, let us assume that the end result of such an analysis would result in a high-level prior association like **PA**, which I believe to be a reasonable interpretation of Yong-Set’s intent.

In any case, the next step is to assess **PA**’s potential for generalization by determining whether there are reasons to believe that **PA** has an analogue in the target domain (that of argumentation). Assuming a mapping of ‘players’ to ‘arguers’ and ‘games/gaming’ to ‘arguments/argumentation,’ translating **PA** is mostly trivial word-replacing. However, it is not immediately clear what ‘engagement’ in the source analog should be mapped to in the target domain – and our choice turns out to be crucial. In the source domain, engagement is a principal goal of successful MUD game designers, for obvious reasons: more engagement means players will keep coming back, ultimately translating to more in-game purchases, advertisement views, and so on. Do the designers of argumentation platforms have a similar goal?

If we are talking about the argumentation platforms predominantly studied by academics, their goals are not necessarily increased engagement, but rather lofty ideals such as clarity of communication, educational benefits, or argument quality. Translating **PA** then becomes something like **PA₁**: *Accommodating diverse arguer types encourages increased overall argument quality in arguments, and not doing so harms argument quality. Thus, we should accommodate diverse arguer types in models of argumentation.* This is certainly not something that researchers in argumentation would accept unanimously, and it might therefore be the basis of empirically testable hypotheses. However, Yong-Set’s article does not present any empirical evidence in either direction, nor does it suggest that such work is forthcoming – an unfortunate omission, as high-level analogies are at their best when they generate testable hypotheses, but their usefulness tends to stop there, being able to only establish at most *prima facie* plausibility claims for those hypotheses.

Perhaps, instead, the concept of ‘engagement’ in the source domain simply corresponds to itself in the target domain, as some parts of Yong-Set’s article seem to suggest. Translating then gives us **PA₂**: *Accommodating diverse arguer types encourages increased overall engagement in arguments, and not doing so harms engagement. Thus, we should accommodate diverse arguer types in models of argumentation.* Although **PA₂**, like **PA₁**, does appear to be useful as the basis of empirically testable hypotheses, it raises another interesting question: Do we actually want more engagement in argumentation platforms?

I am not so sure. Consider the example of social media and online discussion giants such as Facebook and Reddit, where more argumentative dialogues occur on a daily basis than across all academic or formal debate platforms combined (surpassing in quantity, but certainly not in quality). User engagement is certainly a priority of those organizations, for similar reasons as those of game designers: more people getting lured in to online arguments means more ad views, more comments means more free content, etc. To this end, countless behavioral tricks are employed which cater to diverse user types precisely in the way that a ludological approach

would recommend. And they do this *extremely well*; to the degree that “social media addiction” is increasingly being taken seriously by psychologists.¹

“Taking arguers seriously” in light of online argumentation presumably requires understanding the reasons why everyday consumers of social media decide to engage, even if they are acting in bad faith, and it seems that a ludological approach to argumentation would be incomplete unless it addressed these. These arguer types and their reasons for participating do not obviously fall under the two-factor grid in Figure 2. For example, users may want to: troll, spread misinformation or disinformation, earn points (as in the upvote scores Reddit awards to comments) / likes / retweets, make other users or members or political groups feel bad, make one’s self feel better about their own views, and so on. Many social media users simply argue for the sake of arguing. Others rush to post forth controversial and uninformed views simply because they are conditioned to do so in response to provocative article headlines.

Perhaps tackling the many problems of bad argumentation online, which I believe to be one of the greatest problems currently facing humanity, is asking too much of the ludological approach to argumentation. Instead, perhaps the recommendation that we incorporate arguer diversity into our models of argumentation is all that we can expect from it. But if this is the case, then the entire analogy loses what few teeth it seems to have. After all, Yong-Set acknowledges (p.4) that the call to recognize arguer diversity is not new. Let me close, then, with a recommendation that the ludological approach really dig deeper and more systematically into the analogy between gaming and argumentation in order to produce, and subsequently embrace, significantly bolder claims; i.e., what’s needed is not only to take *arguers* seriously, but to take *the analogy* seriously as well.

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¹ <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/is-it-possible-to-become-addicted-to-social-media/>